

A PREVIOUS ENGAGEMENT

MOVIE REVIEW



by debbie lynn elias

There is a reason that Culver City is called "The Heart of Screenland." Rich in history with everything from MGM and Louie B. Mayer to the Munchkins, musicals, Culver Studios, David O. Selznick and Scarlett O'Hara, just to name a few, Culver City can also boast the talents of former Raintree residents, writer-director, Joan Carr-Wiggin, and her husband, producer David Gordian. Culver City was, in fact, "the first time either of us had lived in the U.S. It was a very enlightening experience for us. . . a wonderfully relaxed environment to live in." Entering the film industry as a means of meshing work with home schooling of her daughter, producer Savitri Gordian, Carr-Wiggin has steadily honed her craft as a writer and director achieving more than a modicum of success. With a distinctive, brutally honest, intelligent and entertaining voice, as can be seen with some of her prior ventures like "My First Wedding" and "Honeymoon", her latest project, A PREVIOUS ENGAGEMENT, solidifies the fact that Carr-Wiggin is a force to be reckoned with as a writer and director. From its opening frame, the story and characters leap from the screen and into your heart for what proves to be one of the most affective movie-going experiences of one's life. "Enjoy" is an understatement when it comes to describing A PREVIOUS ENGAGEMENT. This film will resonate with every woman out there - and possibly every man (although as we all know, they aren't the most sensitive or intuitive when it comes to "what if" and heartfelt emotion).

Julia Reynolds is a woman with whom many of us can relate. Once dreaming of being a writer and always thinking "tomorrow is another day", it took awhile - some 23 years - before she realized that life passed her by. Instead of a beautiful young woman in love with a dashing writer, both penning glorious novels, now when she looks in the mirror, she sees a librarian, a mother, a wife and a chief cook and bottle washer, all tinged with a few crows feet and laugh lines. But appearances can be deceiving as despite her outward frustration with her insurance industry, jigsaw puzzling playing, sandals and socks wearing husband Jack, not to mention her two needy, spoiled demanding selfish 20-something daughters, Julia has had a dream, a "what if" dream that she didn't give up on - Alex.

The love of her life, Julia and Alex were strangers in paradise some 25 years ago. In love and in Malta, they had hopes and dreams of what their life would be like together. But Julia, being the pragmatic one, didn't take that leap of faith and stay with Alex. She thought they were rushing things. Alex determined to be with Julia got her to agree to a deal of sorts. Go off. Live your life. But then meet him again in 25 years at "their" little coffee shop in Malta.

Holding on to this dream for the past 25 years, Julia hopes for a second chance at happiness and love when Jack agrees to come with her to Malta for a second honeymoon. But is Julia going to be with Jack or Alex? Will Alex even have remembered their pact, or her? Will he even be there? Concerned only with his jigsaw puzzles and staying in their rented villa, Jack is oblivious to Julia, a sign indicative of their life together and also the final impetus pushing Julia to take that leap of faith and look for Alex.

I won't keep you in suspense but I also won't reveal any spoilers. Julia does find Alex. He's as handsome and sexy as

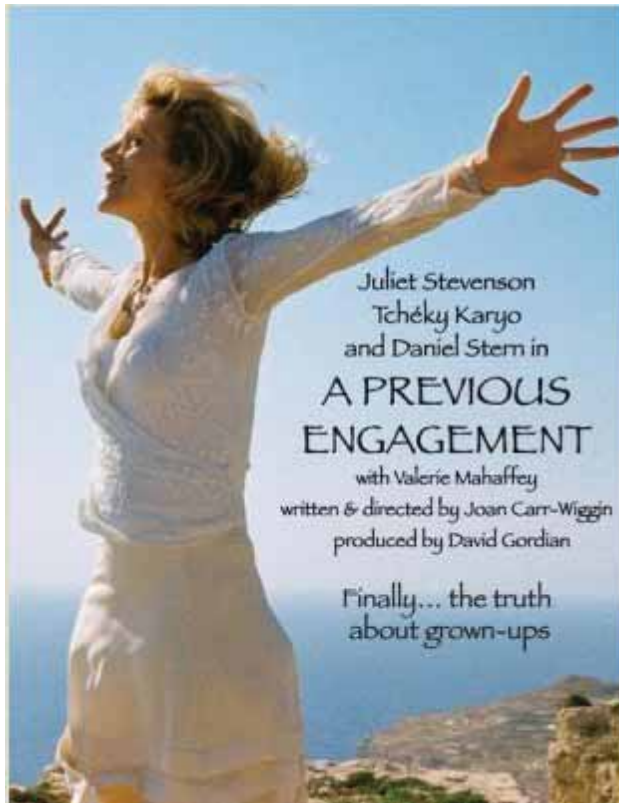
ever; and as much in love with Julia as the last time they were together. Of course, there are a wrinkle or two to deal with. Alex shows up with a young girlfriend while still professing undying love for Julia who is and always has been the love of his life. And bear in mind, Julia is in Malta with her "old husband" plus two daughters who come running and whining to mom and dad across a continent and an ocean, all charged to dad's credit card, of course, and all portrayed with great comic aplomb.

With the fire between them burning as brightly as ever, Alex rekindles Julia's hopes and dreams, setting off a chain of sophisticated comedic events to rival that of Harold Lloyd, including the arrival of a sexy redheaded divorcee with eyes for Jack. Did I say Jack? Hmm. And through it all, we have the beauty of the Mediterranean sparkling like a rare blue diamond under a sunlit or moonlit sky and the romance of the ancient walled city of Mdina and the Xara Palace, all fueling Julia's fire for Alex and her frustration with Jack, complicating even further the choice she must make.

Written by Carr-Wiggin, the script touches a chord and resonates in your heart. "Usually movies go chasing money but in our case, money was chasing a movie so I had absolute freedom." Spurred on by her daughter Savitri who is a producer on the film who advised mom to "just do something for yourself. Just do what you want to do," Joan sat down and "wrote the script really fast and everything just went beautifully from there. I acted as if I was just making a movie for me." Following the philosophy of her favorite director, Preston Sturges, "you just start with the first line and you write one line after another and have it grow organically. And that is how I write." It is this logic to the lines that creates a flow, precluding any need for rewrites during shooting. As I pointed out to her myself, because she did make the film for herself and not trying to please anybody else, not looking at demographics, not looking at the bottom line, she was writing what she felt and that is what touches men and women alike. Indicative of the film's appeal, at the end of a screening at Lincoln Center, a man stood up and said "You have inspired me."

As for the script, well, I'll just say it - ***ing awesome! (And when you see the film you will know from word one why I say this.) The dialogue is crisp, fresh and realistic. Julia's frustration and angst are so real and touching and as I said, will resonate with every woman out there, whether or not she is even wondering "what if" or "what might have been." A mantra of Carr-Wiggin, "I try to stay realistic [when I write]." Boy does she!

However, this emotional conveyance is not only attributable to the story and dialogue. It takes talented actors to bring this story full circle and you can't do much better than Juliet Stevenson to pull off a character like Julia. Described by Carr-Wiggin as "the greatest actress in the world", "Wonderful to work with, the nicest person, funny, smart, absolutely professional. It was heaven



working with her, "Stevenson's Julia is blissfully joyous and real. Her facial expressiveness is hysterical. Not what many would describe as a raving beauty, she has the character lines and flaws that an average woman has. She is "connectable and attainable" with the audience. She conveys the insecurity we all feel about "how do I look", "will he recognize me", "am I old looking". But Stevenson does with a classy nervousness that truly has one empathizing with her - particularly with that butterfly-in-the-stomach-look we all get over that one certain someone. Herself having lived happily on Malta as a child, only added to the unabashed joy of her performance.

I have to thank the casting director Mark Palidini for Tchéky Karyo whom I can watch and lust after all day long. As entrancing as he was in "The Patriot" years ago, the years have only improved him both in looks and in his performance making him the perfect Alex. Karyo has aged so gracefully and is so disarming, unassuming and sincere on screen. You believe his love for Julia. His eyes speak volumes and make not only Julia, but every woman in the audience go weak in the knees. And ladies, he is a real treat; eye candy for not only those of us in our 40's and 50's but even 30-somethings will find him pleasurable and desirable. Why are there no men like this out there in the marketplace???? (Obviously they may all be hiding on Malta and if they are, I'm getting my ticket today!)

Daniel Stern blew me out of the water as Jack. With the most defining character arc of all the characters, as Jack, Stern gives the strongest and most revealing characterization of his career. While he retains his goofball "City Slickers" put-upon charm, you see his character progress emotionally until finally showing some backbone and spine that is refreshing and welcome. He grows. He matures. But he retains that childish charm by letting go, even when dancing in the airport.

A joy for me is Valerie Mahaffey who, I believe, is one of the most overlooked talents in the industry today. I, however, will watch her in anything and everything and luckily for us, so will Joan Carr-Wiggin who wrote the part of Grace specifically for Mahaffey. Always exciting and

entertaining, Mahaffey adds a bimbettish and coquettish effervescent idiocy to her characters that you just love, and as Grace is no exception. Her chemistry with Daniel Stern is undeniable and those two are a perfect match.

As a director, Carr-Wiggin's voice is equally as strong as her writing. Clear and concise in her direction, like Julia, she knows what she wants and is willing to take that leap to get it - literally. Having a great fear of heights, so intent in her visual conviction, Carr-Wiggin goes to great heights in more ways than one and in one spectacular scene on top of cliff, perches cameras precariously on the edge ready to plummet into the Mediterranean if the wind blows the wrong way taking cast and crew with them. Fortuitously, the shot came off without a hitch and is one of the "money shots" of the film.

Even if you have ice running through your veins, that is not a reason to not see A PREVIOUS ENGAGEMENT. Cinematographer Bruce Worrall's work is exquisite and more than worth the price of admission. The film is extraordinarily beautiful, saturated and sparkling with color and texture. Through his lighting and lensing, Malta is even more beautiful on film than in coffee table picture books and picture postcards. It is this striking elegance and beauty that gives the film an Edensque feel leading one to wonder how one could not fall in love and then want to wait 25 years to see if the emotion is real or just the magic of the country. I could watch the "travelogue" footage and seascapes over and over again on a continuous loop and never tire of it.

This is THE film for every hopeful romantic, for every frustrated wife, girlfriend, lover who is "past her prime" and for everyone that has ever wondered about "that one true love" or that "what if". Carr-Wiggin fulfills that wistful hopefulness in us all. Get engaged with A PREVIOUS ENGAGEMENT - a wistful, hopeful romantic comedy you'll fall in love with over and over again.

Julia Reynolds - Juliet Stevenson
Jack Reynolds - Daniel Stern
Alex Belmont - Tchéky Karyo
Grace - Valerie Mahaffey

Written and directed by Joan Carr-Wiggin. (118 min)

